From Imperial Metaphor to Rebellious Deities:  
The History and Modern State of Western Studies  
of Chinese Popular Religion  

by  
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Introduction

The central purpose of this paper is to discuss the current achievements of Western scholars in the field of “Chinese popular religion” and to briefly present major discussions, trends, and subjects in this field. I analyze particular features of the Western scholarship on Chinese popular religion that often make it different from the relevant Chinese scholarship.

The basic structure and ideas of this essay originated in lectures that I gave at several universities in Taiwan and PRC over the period 2012–2013. In the process of preparation for them I discovered that there is no updated contemporary discussion of this subject either in English or Chinese.

There are already several overviews of the state of this field in English and Chinese;¹

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most of the works in this category, however, have quite specific purposes. For example, they criticize the existing terminology of “popular religion” and advocate for a replacement. These studies also tend to emphasize certain areas prevalent in the field and to reflect the author’s position in the current argument over major questions in the study of popular beliefs. As a result, there is a need for a more objective and general overview to provide perspective for students of Chinese religion and other readers interested in this field. This overview is very important if one takes into consideration that this field of studies is now growing in Chinese and Japanese scholarship. Scholars in East Asia often refer to the Western studies in this field, and a number of Western works have been translated into Chinese and published recently in China.

This paper is designed to contribute to the creation of such an overview. However, it is not intended at all to be comprehensive. It is not the result of a special research project, since resources have been lacking to undertake such research. The paper is based mostly on information that I have collected during my work on several research projects, all related to the beliefs of commoners in China in the late imperial period.

In order to define the scope of my overview, I would like to note that “Western” in the essay’s title refers to works written and published in English, without consideration of the background and citizenship of their authors. I tried to present only areas in which Western scholars made the largest contribution, and approaches and views that have influenced the relevant East Asian scholarship (in Chinese and Japanese). I also need to note that I am discussing works that deal mostly with the so-called late imperial period in the history of China, — which usually includes the Yuan (1260–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1911)


2 The reader will find that many important studies mentioned in this paper were written in English by scholars of Chinese origin and/or citizenship.
dynasties — plus the early Republican period (1911–1949). I treat only works that deal with the religion of the Han people of mainland China and Taiwan, not including research on the religions of the minority groups in China and overseas Chinese (especially Chinese communities of Southeast Asia). In order to demonstrate the importance of Western works in the context of East Asian scholarship, I provide information about Chinese translations where relevant.

The essay opens with a brief overview of the characteristic features and history of Western scholarship on Chinese popular religion (section 1), then discusses a special area of studies for which Western scholarship is famous (section 2), describes the major theoretical discussions in Western studies (sections 3 and 4), and closes with an overview of subjects and approaches specific to Western scholarship (section 5).

1. The problem of terminology and the history of study of Chinese popular religion in the West

First, I would like to note that the term “popular religion” that appears in the title of this paper was coined and introduced by Western scholars. It is quite problematic and imprecise. The term came to appear in Chinese studies as a result of the application of Western theory to the study of the beliefs of commoners in China. Several scholars have divided Chinese religion into “big” and “small” traditions, corresponding respectively to the beliefs of ruling and lower classes. The understanding of the meaning of “popular” in this term is also problematic. Catherine Bell has classified three different approaches to “Chinese popular religion” in Western scholarship, which she interprets as the chronological succession of three models or stages. At the first stage there

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3 As we shall see, it is hard to differentiate between late imperial and modern periods in these works, as they often use materials dating back to both periods. However, I do not here address studies focusing on the contemporary period; for a discussion of the relationship of religion and modernity in China, see Katz, “Xifang xuejie yanjiu,” pp. 70–73.

4 One should note that these directions in research also have long existed in Western scholarship and are now rapidly developing.

was a stress on the marked difference between elite and popular religion. At the second stage “the holistic view” prevailed, which defined popular religion as a form of religion shared by the populace of China across social boundaries. At the third stage most scholars interpreted this form of religion as less an entity than an activity or an arena of conflict. Recently, Bell’s view of these three stages was challenged by Philip Clart, who demonstrated that the three approaches cannot be interpreted as a chronological succession. The holistic views actually appeared during the early period of studies, while the “elite–folk dichotomy” perspective became prevalent in the works of Western scholars who studied the religion of rural areas in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, the three approaches outlined by Bell are not mutually exclusive. The third definition provides a type of resolution for the conflict of the two previous views, as it allows the discussion of conflict/interplay of unity and difference in consideration of all of Chinese culture. There are a number of influential works that adopt the analysis of unity and diversity in Chinese beliefs as a theoretical basis.

As the term “popular religion” has often and successfully been criticized in recent scholarship, several leading scholars of Chinese religion avoid it; they have suggested other terms instead. For example, Paul R. Katz has used the term “communal religious traditions” and Daniel L. Overmyer has used the term “local religion” in his recent book on the modern state of religion in North China. However, in this essay I use the traditional term “popular religion” in

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the sense of the common beliefs and practices of lay people of Han nationality. In my view, it helps to represent the religion of Chinese while avoiding the traditional division between the main institutionalized spiritual systems — Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and the so-called “sectarian movements.” In this usage this term has the meaning of “Chinese religion,” in which the elements of the main traditions mentioned above co-exist in constant interplay. The alternative terms mentioned above appear to me either clumsy or imprecise.

Second, one needs to note that research on Chinese popular religion is limited by the nature of sources available to modern scholars. For the Tang dynasty (618–907) and earlier, the evidence on popular religion comes mainly from the sources composed by literati who were usually biased against popular practices. Only archaeological discoveries of art objects and manuscripts have given solid insights into the real state of affairs.10 There are more sources dating back to the Song (960–1279) and Yuan dynasties, but only for the Ming and Qing periods do scholars have a large number of materials on popular religion, including epigraphy, local and private histories, miscellanea (biji 笔記), vernacular prose and drama, hagiographies and liturgical manuals, genealogies, and archival records. That is why most studies of popular religion focus on the Ming, Qing, and later periods.

Third, I would like to emphasize the fact that Western scholars were the first to study systematically the popular religious systems of China. Since a very early period, they contributed not only to the theoretical approaches toward popular religion, but also were engaged in the ethnographic fieldwork. To make our understanding of the historical process of these studies clearer, one can divide it into four periods. The first one spanned from the nineteenth century to the 1920s and can be defined as the “missionary period.” One can roughly date the second period to the 1930s-1950s and call it the “historical period.” The third period (1960s-1980s) is the “anthropological period.” The fourth, modern or “comprehensive” period, started in the 1990s and continues till now.

Western missionaries were among the first people to research and describe the religious life of the Chinese; in addition, they treated these beliefs and practices as an integral part of the social and cultural sphere in China, and that was an innovative approach. The works by missionaries still have a historical value: some of them were recently translated into Chinese and published in China. The works by Jan Jakob Maria de Groot (1854–1921) dating back to this period were particularly important for the further development of the study of popular religion. Modern scholars have noted de Groot’s influence in terms of the combination of the study of written sources and fieldwork, the choice of informants and the style of analysis. One should note that his comprehensive descriptions of religious practices of the Amoy (Xiamen) area have great historical value.

The second period encompasses the work of such historians of Chinese religion as Henri Maspero (1883–1945), Marcel Granet (1884–1940), and Wolfram Eberhard (1909–1989). In their works took place the discussions of the nature of “popular religion” in China that had great

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theoretical significance. The fieldwork studies continued in this period, but scholars in the West also extensively used historical material.

The results of the analysis of both types of materials combined with the use of Western concepts were summarized in the book on Chinese religion and society by C. K. Yang that became a very influential work in this field. Yang used Western sociological concepts for his discussion of the religious beliefs and practices of the Chinese and demonstrated that they had an important role in the history of society and state in China. That was a significant contribution to the understanding of Chinese religion, as previous studies, especially the works of Westernized Chinese intellectuals, had underestimated its role in society. His other theoretical contribution was the division between the “institutional” and “diffused” forms of religion in China. In Yang’s view institutional religion is characterized by a consciously systematized theology, scriptures, organized forms of worship, and professional religious personnel; in diffused religion, “its theology, cultus, and personnel [are] so intimately diffused into one or more secular social institutions that they become a part of the concept, rituals, and structure of the latter, thus having no significant independent existence.” The institutional religions thus appear similar to the religions of Western world, while the diffused religion in China seems to be entirely unique. According to this view, Confucianism (with some restrictions), Daoism, and Buddhism — the traditional “three teachings” — are institutional religions, while other beliefs and practices fall into the category of diffused popular religion.

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14 See, for example, W. A. Grootaers, Li Shih-yü, Wang Fu-shih, The Sanctuaries in a North-China City: A Complete Survey of the Cultic Buildings in the City of Hsüan-hua (Chahar), by the survey team of Fujen University, August 1948 (Bruxelles: Institut Belge des hautes etudes Chinoises, 1995).


17 Ibid., pp. 294–295.
This approach is still influential in modern scholarship, though many scholars have revised and criticized this classification. First, most modern scholars would agree that there is a fourth form of highly organized religion in China, namely the so-called “syncretic religions,” or sects that flourished especially during the Ming and Qing periods, and that they still have a big influence on the religious landscape in different regions of China. Western scholars initially made a great contribution to the study of these traditions (see section 2). Second, in the Western scholarship the study of syncretism of different “institutional” religious traditions was highly developed. Several special studies have demonstrated that in different time periods there was close interaction between several religious traditions, namely Buddhism and Daoism, so it was almost impossible to divide between them on the popular level.\(^{18}\) There was interchange of ideas and practices in Buddhism and Daoism: for example, Buddhist deities of foreign origin were highly integrated into the Chinese religious system after their cults underwent considerable transformation in China.\(^{19}\) The scholarship on Daoism has demonstrated that it is practically impossible to differentiate between folk beliefs and Daoist institutions, as they are so closely interrelated.\(^{20}\) The new term of “communal religious traditions” has been designed to overcome


the outdated classification into the institutional and diffused forms of religion.\textsuperscript{21} Third, several scholars have insisted that the local traditions of worship not directly connected with Buddhism and Daoism are also organized into a coherent system. For example, in his recent book on local religious traditions in North China, Overmyer has argued against Yang’s bifurcation and states “that local traditions of ritual and belief are important both in their own right and as a foundation of traditional Chinese ideas, values and social relationships. These traditions are persistent and deeply institutionalized in their own ways …”\textsuperscript{22}

In the 1960s-1980s local religious traditions of China became the subject of numerous works by Western anthropologists, who mainly conducted their fieldwork in Taiwan and Hong-Kong, the principle areas open to foreign scholars at that time.\textsuperscript{23} The important characteristic of the “anthropological period” was the further application of Western theories of beliefs and ritual practice to the Chinese materials.

Important changes took place in the field of Chinese religion studies in the fourth period of their development. This period has the following distinctive features: (1) Western scholars redefined many theories and approaches after the detailed analysis of new materials that had recently become available; (2) many collaborative research projects involving Western and Chinese/Taiwanese scholars have taken place. With regard to the first point, many Western scholars recently have stressed even more the important role of religion in social life in China, as they rejected the traditional division into the separate categories of religion and society. Especially important are works that emphasize the role of religious traditions in the initial period of the formation of “civil society” and the “public sphere” in early modern China. Katz in his book about the deity of plague Marshal Wen, worshipped in South China (most of his materials

\textsuperscript{21} Katz, “Xifang xuejie yanjiu,” p. 58.

\textsuperscript{22} Daniel L. Overmyer, \textit{Local Religion in North China}, p. 5.

come from Zhejiang province), has argued that the scholars who studied Chinese society and religion separately ignored or underestimated the role of religion in public life because they were basing their observations on Western concepts of the public sphere. But in the Chinese public sphere religious activities such as temple societies, deity cults, monasteries, and secret societies played an important role. Temples and festivals were run by special organizations outside the imperial bureaucracy, and their religious activities were both supported by local communities and scrutinized by the state. Katz has concluded that “cults to popular deities like Marshal Wen, whose followers included both religious specialists and lay believers, may well have been an integral part of China’s third realm in the sense of occupying a public sphere between state and society.” This interpretation laid down the foundation for a new concept of religion and society in traditional China. Most modern works in Western languages analyze the social roles of religious institutions and practices.

The second feature is related to the growth of China’s own research on popular religion. Chinese scholars trained as anthropologists or historians of religion have turned to doing fieldwork in several areas of China. Collaborative projects conducted by scholars from different countries have existed for a long time, but recently they have grown into large and fruitful efforts. The results of these research projects have been published in English as well as in Chinese. To a different but still significant extent, Western scholars have taken part in the

24 Reduced to the “third realm” — a space between state and society in which both interact — in the theory concerning existence of the public sphere in China by Philip C. C. Huang.


26 Katz, Demon Hordes, p. 189.

27 For a useful overview of the results of this work, see Daniel L. Overmyer, with the assistance of Shin-Yi Chao, ed., Ethnography in China Today: A Critical Assessment of Methods and Results (Taipei: Yuan-Liou, 2002).


large research projects “Traditional Hakka Society Series” (Kejia chuantong shehui congshu 客家傳統社會叢書), “Traditional Zhejiang Society Series” (Zhejiang chuantong shehui congshu 浙江傳統社會叢書), “Series on the Local Religion of North China” (Huabei difang zongjiao congshu 華北地方宗教叢書), and others. The cooperation of scholars from different countries leads to the exchange of ideas, methods, and views that will define the further development of studies of Chinese popular religion.

In the following sections I discuss the areas in the study of Chinese religion in which Western scholars have made the most significant contributions and demonstrated especially innovative approaches.

2. The study of sectarian traditions

One of the major contributions of Western scholars to the study of Chinese religious traditions was the comprehensive research into the sectarian teachings that occupy an important place in the Chinese religious landscape in the late imperial period. The scholars of the “missionary period” started to pay attention to sects that were strictly persecuted by the imperial government: the work by de Groot again is noteworthy in this aspect. The works by Overmyer were path-breaking in this aspect of Chinese studies: significantly, his major monographs on this topic have been all translated into Chinese. In his first work, Overmyer demonstrated the special nature of...
the ideology, mythology, and personnel of sectarian movements.  

In their collaborative work, David Jordan and Overmyer have analyzed the transformation and survival of sectarian traditions in modern Taiwan.  

Another work by Overmyer has dealt with the contents of the special liturgical literature of sects — “precious scrolls” (baojuan 寶卷), which appeared during the Southern Song (1127–1279) or Yuan period and flourished during the Ming period. One of the major contributions of Overmyer and his followers was the interpretation of sects as genuinely religious organizations, while contemporary Chinese scholarship emphasized their role in organizing rebellions and regarded them as political organizations. Western scholars, starting with Overmyer, have put special emphasis on the search for the origins of sectarian ideology and mythology: the popular forms of Buddhism, especially Maitreyanism, and Manichaeism in the period prior to and during the Yuan dynasty, were defined as the most probable sources.

Later a number of Western works appeared that discussed the history of one particular teaching or contained a general overview of the history of several traditions. One should


especially note works by Susan Naquin in which she explored the political aspect of the sectarian movements and demonstrated the role of heterodox religious ideas in the prominent social upheavals of the Qing dynasty.\(^{39}\) Western scholars also paid considerable attention to the religious components of the Boxer rebellion (Yihetuan) in 1899.\(^{40}\) These studies contributed to the new interpretation of these important events in the history of Chinese state.

Now there are different views of the history of Chinese sectarian movements in Western scholarship. For example, Barend J. ter Haar has reinterpreted the traditional history of sects that took the “Teaching of the White Lotus (Bailianjiao 白蓮教)” as a prototype of all rebellious religious movements of the late imperial period. In his book he has re-evaluated the available materials, demonstrated the transformation of the White Lotus society from its beginning as a lay Buddhist movement during Southern Song into the rebellious organization during Yuan, and he has come to the conclusion that the term “Teaching of the White Lotus,” often used in the official

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\(^{38}\) See, for example, Hubert Seiwert, in collaboration with Ma Xisha, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003).


sources about religious rebels, was actually no more than a label that started with the Ming dynasty; therefore, he has cautioned researchers against the danger of overusing official sources. Another important work by ter Haar has analyzed the religious component of the Triads (Tiandihui 天地會 in Chinese), in this way crossing the traditional boundary drawn between so-called “secret religions” and “secret societies” in the Western scholarship. Earlier Western scholars, starting with Overmeyer, treated the first as primarily religious organizations and the latter primarily as organizations with political goals. However, according to ter Haar, such secret societies as the Triads also included a religious aspect in their activities: these were deeply rooted in more mainstream mythology and religious practice.

Western scholars have continued their research of Chinese sectarian movements in this recent, fourth period. An important achievement was the publication of two special volumes of Minsu quyi 民俗曲藝 (English title: Journal of Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore) dedicated to the redemptive societies and salvationist religions during the last decades of the Chinese empire, Republican, and modern periods. The articles by scholars of various countries explore the development of the philanthropist side of new religions and thus offer an important perspective for the further interpretation of these sects in Chinese history.

3. Theoretical discussions

A. Standardization in Chinese religion and culture

One of the current major discussions in the field of study of Chinese popular religion involves the problems of standardization and cultural unity in traditional China. These problems fall into

43 Daniel L. Overmyer, Folk Buddhist Religion, pp. 54–56.
44 ter Haar conducts a research project on the Teaching of Dragon Flower (Longhuajiao 龍華教), which developed and persisted in Fujian and Taiwan from the late imperial period till now.
the major area of interest of Western scholars — the social role of religion — and became major theoretical issues in the third period of the history of Western research into Chinese religion.

Western scholars since early days have paid attention to the high degree of cultural integration in China that persisted despite the existence of numerous differences, including those of religious practices. In the 1980s, an American scholar, James L. Watson, discussed the question of standardization in his works on Chinese popular religion that became very influential in this field. In his first article Watson analyzed the case of the promotion of a state-approved deity, the sea goddess Tianhou 天后 (also known as Mazu 媽祖), by state authorities and local elites as an example of the cultural integration of the country through the standardization of culture.46 Later Watson developed his ideas in his preface to a volume dealing with funerary rites, *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*. There, he used the term “orthopraxy” (correct practice) in application to Chinese religion. He argued that cultural authorities (officials and elites) focused on the standardization of ritual practice rather than trying to actually control the beliefs of the people. This view helps to explain the high degree of variation within an overarching structure of unity; in Watson’s terms: “By enforcing orthopraxy (correct practice) rather than orthodoxy (correct belief) state officials made it possible to incorporate people from many different ethnic or ritual backgrounds with varying beliefs and attitudes into an overarching social system we now call China.”47

Watson’s work stimulated further discussion on standardization in the late imperial period; his theory now has both proponents and opponents among the leading scholars of Chinese religion. In many cases, Watson’s theory of standardization and orthopraxy was very useful for explaining the social role of religion. In such cases the uniformity of interests and the actions of


the state representatives and local elites was evident. The state and elites could cooperate in promoting certain rites or the cult of a specific deity. State control in the sphere of popular cults had been very important since early times. For several reasons, intellectuals who served as state officials in charge of control over the rituals proclaimed certain religious practices to be “illicit.” They regarded these cults as harmful to the morality or the material welfare of commoners. The term “licentious sacrifices” (yinsi 淫祀) has been used frequently in the discourse of state officials from at least the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.—220 C.E.) up to the present time.48 However, in the later period local elites often patronized certain cults that the state could deem illicit because they thought of these deities as especially powerful and responsive; sometimes they petitioned the government for official recognition of a certain deity worshipped locally. The state recognition of such a local deity usually had the form of granted titles (fenghao 封號), temple placards (bian’e 匾額), or stele inscriptions (beiwen 碑文). The movement to obtain court-granted titles was especially prominent in the Lower Yangtze region during the Southern Song period, and it became the subject of a special study by Valerie Hansen.49 Local people overenumerated this state recognition, it turns out, so that a large number of cults in the region claimed the official status of their local gods, but in reality never obtained it.50

Examples of the uniformity of elite and state actions in promoting the cults of deities include the transformation of the Guandi 關帝 cult in the Qing period, analyzed by Prasenjit Duara. In his work Duara has argued that elites assisted the state in its endeavor to superscribe


51 Deified historical person Guan Yu 關羽 (160–219 C.E.).
the officially approved image of Guandi as a loyal hero onto an older one of a god of wealth. Several scholars who studied the transformation of the cults of certain gods in late imperial period explicitly followed Watson’s theory of standardization. For example, Guo Qitao has regarded the growth of the cult of exorcistic deities called the Five Furies (Wuchang 五猖) in the Huizhou （徽州）area (modern Anhui province) as part of the processes of “integration” and “gentrification” promoted by local elites. Richard von Glahn has presented another case of standardization while analyzing the development of the cult of the Wutong 五通 deities, who were worshipped as providers of illicit wealth (usually in exchange for sexual favors), into the mainstream cult of Wuxian 五顯, becoming gods of wealth in the Lower Yangtze region.

However, other scholars have argued that such a view of standardization is too simplistic. For example, Katz has suggested that the collaboration on the part of officials and the elite was only one variant of conventional social interaction in the field of religious beliefs and practices. Katz has noted that the Watson’s theory of standardization raised two major issues that still await to resolution by scholars: (1) how exactly certain religious practices were standardized, and (2) what group of actors was the main force behind this standardization. With regard to the first issue, on the basis of his own research on the local cults of Zhejiang province and also after summarizing the research of other scholars, Katz has persuasively argued that standardization of culture and religion in particular “involved not necessarily one single process but rather many processes promoted by a diverse range of groups that coexisted and interacted with each other.” As for the second issue, Katz has suggested that three forces had the dominant influence in the

so-called standardization: officials (state representatives), local elites, and ritual specialists (most notably Daoists).

Research by Western sinologists has demonstrated that elites often had their own interests, which differed from the state objective of cultural hegemony. Usually these were related to the control of local power. It is known, for example, that elites promoted cults to deities that were not officially approved. Robert Hymes has analyzed an example of this conflict in a book about the religious history of Mount Huagai in Fuzhou (Jiangxi province). During the Southern Song period an official unsuccessfully attempted to promote the cult of an immortal at Mount Ba over one at Mount Huagai devoted to the Three Perfected Lords (San zhenzun, a cult patronized by members of the elite, including prominent Daoists. Michael Szonyi has discussed another case of such state–elite opposition in Fuzhou, Fujian province. There, local elites tried to mask the unapproved cult of the Five Emperors (Wudi) under the state-approved norms and thus maintained the distinctive cults of their community while creating an illusion of standardization. Szonyi has defined this and similar practices as “pseudo-standardization” and “pseudo-orthopraxy.”

Katz also has demonstrated the important role of religious specialists in promoting cults of certain deities, for example, Marshal Wen. Significantly, Daoists also used the term

56 Many scholars would identify them with the gentry (shenshi) layer of the traditional society, though one should be aware that representatives of other classes could be influential as well.


60 Michael Szonyi, “Making Claims about Standardization and Orthopraxy in Late Imperial China: Rituals and Cults in the Fuzhou Region in Light of Watson’s Theories,” Modern China 33, no. 1 (Jan. 2007), pp. 63–64.

“licentious sacrifices” in application to the worship of morally deviant deities (usually the ghosts of the unruly dead or nature spirits) by spirit mediums (wu 巫師) who led rituals involving “bloody [i.e., meat] offerings” (xueshi 血食) for them.\(^{62}\) However, if a deity’s cult adhered to the basic rules of a certain Daoist tradition, Daoists could incorporate it in their spiritual system.

Several scholars have openly criticized Watson’s theory of standardization. The special volume of the journal *Modern China* called “Ritual, Cultural Standardization, and Orthopraxy in China: Reconsidering James L. Watson’s Ideas” was devoted to this discussion.\(^{63}\) While reconsidering Watson’s ideas and especially their application in later works, Donald S. Sutton has proposed the counter theory of “heteropraxy” (consistent failure to follow an avowed belief system on the part of believers) or “pseudo-standardization.” Local elites consciously maintained heteropraxy. In his analysis of differences in the funerary rites of several distinct regions of China, he argues that “what determined local patterns, as well as minor variations, was neither assertion by reforming leaders nor emulation of some China-wide orthodoxy, but new needs and engrained habits.” Besides, among the decisive factors were “immediate issues of individual sentiment and local advantage.”\(^{64}\)

David Faure in his article in Chinese in his turn has criticized the views of the authors of the volume on reconsidering James L. Watson’s ideas, especially those proposed by Szonyi and Sutton. His main counter-argument concerns the definition of orthodoxy by the authors, who use the terms “pseudo-orthodoxy” or “heteropraxy.” First, we should remember that the notion of orthodoxy existed only in people’s minds, and it is very tricky for modern scholars to determine what this orthodoxy meant for people of a certain time and place in the past. Faure has argued against the over-simplistic interpretation of Watson’s theory of standardization as a linear one-directional process. Faure’s own view is close to that of Katz: several traditions and participants

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\(^{63}\) Several articles quoted above were printed in this volume (33, no. 1).

\(^{64}\) Donald S. Sutton, “Death Rites and Chinese Culture: Standardization and Variation in Ming and Qing Times,” *Modern China* 33, no. 1 (Jan. 2007), p. 146.
interacted in the process of standardization. At the same time Faure has noted that it is not reasonable to differentiate rigidly between the three major participants in the process in Katz’s model. For example, it is well known that the Daoists often emulated state models in their ideology and rituals. These three groups were not as independent as it may seem to a modern person.

According to Faure, even if one takes the Neo-Confucian–inspired model of state control as the orthodoxy, this differed in time and place. Faure has explained the difference between the Zhejiang/Fujian and Southern Guangdong (Pearl River Delta) regions by the fact that state control took different forms in these areas: while in Zhejiang/Fujian it found its expression in the official recognition of local deities through granting titles, in Southern Guangdong standardization of the lineage rituals was the most important element. Faure further has related this phenomenon to the difference in the cultural politics of the state during the Song dynasty, when Zhejiang and Fujian were brought under the state control, and during the Ming dynasty, when the Pearl River Delta actually became controlled by the state. Different methods of state politics in the realm of popular beliefs and practices existed. Therefore, many questions concerning the processes of standardization and creation and transmission of orthodoxy in traditional China remain open and await further research.

**B. Varying views of the Chinese pantheon**

Another large topic related to the previous question of standardization concerns the interpretation of the Chinese pantheon and world outlook. In the earlier period of the studies of Chinese

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68 See also Zhang Xun, “Bai hua qi fang,” pp. 7–11.
religions, many Western anthropologists adopted the sociological approach towards religion, namely the theories of Max Weber (1864–1920) and Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) about the connections of social structure and a system of religious beliefs. Here again one can see how much attention Western scholars have paid to the relations between beliefs and society in China.

Arthur Wolf, who studied the role of religious beliefs in modern Chinese society, proposed a theory according to which the system of religious beliefs was modeled on the bureaucratic system of the Chinese empire. According to Wolf, gods, ghosts, and ancestors have different statuses in “the supernatural bureaucracy.”69 Just as the social world is divided into the bureaucrats, kinsmen, and strangers, in the supernatural world there is a division between gods, ancestors, and ghosts. This difference finds its expression in the form of worship and manner of offerings. Gods correspond to officials; ancestors, to senior members of a line or lineage; and the dangerous and despised — but also worshipped — ghosts, to strangers. Another factor is that every person can simultaneously take the various social roles of kinsman, citizen, and stranger, which also corresponds to the structure of supernatural world: “At death the kinsman takes his place on the ancestral altar, where he continues to perform many of his rights and duties as an ascendant; the citizen is conducted to the underworld by a representative of the supernatural bureaucracy and is there judged and punished; while the stranger goes into the grave and becomes the source of an amoral and impersonal power.”70 Thus, Wolf’s model also explains why the spirit of a dead person can take the double role of ancestor in one lineage and ghost in another.71 The bureaucratic view of Chinese religion was aptly summarized in the term “imperial metaphor” that appears in the title of an influential book by Stephan Feuchtwang.72


70 Ibid., p.176.

71 David K. Jordan also discussed this hierarchy in his Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: Folk Religion in a Taiwanese Village.

Many later scholars of Chinese religion, however, contested the theory of the “bureaucratic model.” A special collection of essays dealing with “unruly gods” was published as a result.73 These essays have demonstrated that in many cases state authorities did not recognize deities of a demonic nature, at least in their most widespread forms; yet their cults enjoyed great popularity in large groups of society. The cults of these deities often challenged the social hierarchy of the late imperial state. The editors of this collection, Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller, have argued that “many deities are not conceived in simple bureaucratic terms and that the parallels between Chinese religion and politics are only partially revealing.”74 They did not completely reject the bureaucratic facet of Chinese religion, but they argued that it was not the only or dominating model of the supernatural. Summarizing the ideas of essays that deal with the cults of particular deities, the editors have concluded that “some of the most popular gods do not carry the trappings of office, and their power is not imagined in bureaucratic terms. They do not belong to a celestial bureaucracy. Their devotees address them in a personal language rather than in an administrative jargon. While the bureaucratic idea clearly dominates in the state religion, in the popular religion it is but one of several ways to think about the supernatural.”75 Numerous deities featured in the essays of that volume do not fit the bureaucratic model of the pantheon, and the few who still have bureaucratic celestial posts are usually ascribed with personalities, careers, and educational backgrounds that differ markedly from the appropriate backgrounds of officeholders in late imperial China. These unruly gods include spirits possessing questionable Confucian morality that have nevertheless risen to prominence and even rivaled properly bureaucratic gods: for example, Weller has presented situations concerning the cult of Ganwang (甘王) in east-central Guangxi province in the 1840s and the cult of “eighteen lords” (shība wanggōng 十八王公) in Taiwan in the 1980s in his essay in this volume.76 These deities were


75 Ibid., p. 8.

76 Robert P. Weller, “Matricidal Magistrates and Gambling Gods: Weak States and Strong Spirits in China,” in
known in both locations more for their immoral actions, such as sexual license, drunkenness, gambling, and murder, than for dedication to bureaucratic order. Weller also linked the rise of these illicit cults to the political, economical, and social peculiarities of corresponding regions. He has concluded that the rebellious facet of the pantheon has always existed side by side with its bureaucratic and orderly dimension. He notes, however, that this reversed aspect of the supernatural gains dominance in cases where the bureaucratic state loses control over religion.77

In another essay of this volume Meir Shahar has presented a useful classification of the non-bureaucratic deities based on the material of vernacular fiction. According to Shahar, there are three groups of gods that did not belong to the male-dominated literati elite of late imperial times: female (such as Bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音菩薩 and Mazu), eccentric and rebellious (such as the drunken monk Jigong濟公 and the mischievous monkey Sun Wukong 孫悟空), and martial (such as Zhenwu 真武 and Guan Yu).78

Steven Sangren has taken another perspective on formulating the relations within the Chinese pantheon: he has argued that the danger for the bureaucratic order in Chinese religion often comes from the tensions in family relations. Sangren has analyzed three myths of non-bureaucratic deities: Nazha 哪吒, Guanyin (Miaoshan 妙善), and Mulian 目連. Their stories have been widespread in vernacular fiction, drama, and storytelling. Sangren has argued that these myths enjoyed great popularity because they expressed feelings and frustrations that were usually repressed in the normative state-approved self-representations of Chinese culture.79

Prince Nazha was a rebellious son who attempted to kill his father. Princess Miaoshan (a reincarnation of Guanyin) refused her father’s order that she marry and thus violated the Confucian paradigm of family and social life. She was successful on the Buddhist path of

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individual salvation and also reformulated the Confucian ideal of filial piety from this perspective. Mulian violated the rules of the bureaucratic order of Underworld in his actions aimed at the salvation of the soul of his sinful mother. Sangren’s essay also has raised the gender problematic, such as the question of the subversive power of women in Chinese religion that also often attracted attention of Western scholars (see section 5).

Other deities of a subversive nature or origin represented in this volume include the “immoral immortal” Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓; a female deity, Lady of Linshui (Linshui furen臨水夫人), whose cult is prevalent in Fujian and Taiwan; and the Infernal Generals (Bajiajiang 八家將) worshipped in Taiwan. It is also very important that the editors of the volume have pointed to the role of non-bureaucratic deities in millenarian movements and social outbreaks. The authors of the essays in this volume also have paid attention to the forms of support for the subversive cults and the ways of their transmission. These problems are related to the discussion of standardization, creation, and transmission of orthodoxy, discussed in the previous section of this paper.

Later Western studies of Chinese religion further testified for the importance of the subversive cults in popular traditions. Poul Andersen wrote a monograph about the ancient cult of the water spirit Wuzhiqi 巫支祁 in Xuyi 盱眙 county (in modern Jiangsu province). While in South China the so-called illicit cults were often represented by plague-inflicting demons (also

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translated as “furies”), in North China there was another peculiar category of subversive gods—fox spirits. There are two English monographs about the worship of the fox in North China.84 Foxes were well known for their immoral actions; however, they also attracted enormous attention from the literati and were often portrayed in literati works of late imperial times. Significantly, Kang Xiaofei in her analysis of literati records discovered that their authors often drew parallels between the Wutong deities of the South and the foxes of the North.85 In their studies, therefore, Western scholars recreated a broad picture of the complex pantheon of Chinese religion.

4. Subjects in Western studies of Chinese popular religion
For quite a long time scholars of Chinese religion have tried to avoid employing the broad category of “popular religion” and instead have preferred detailed analysis of such smaller units as family religion, morality, cosmology, and spirit-possession. Stephen F. Teiser noted this tendency in the mid-1990s.86 As we have seen in sections 3 and 4 of this paper, the major theoretical discussions in Western scholarship on Chinese religion involved such subjects as gods and their cults, religion and the family, cosmology, and rites of passage. These subjects became traditional in this field. In this section I would like to discuss other subjects and aspects of popular religion that Western scholars have explored at length. In the research on several of these subjects Western scholars were pioneers and continue to make important contributions now.

For example, one must credit Western scholars with the early discovery and scholarly analysis of the diversity of forms of popular beliefs and practices in China. To turn only to the subject of mantic practices, we observe that a variety of methods and materials for divination since early times were explored in Western studies. One can classify divinations by material:

84 Xiaofei Kang, The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Rania Huntington, Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003).


tortoise shells, scapulae, yarrow stalks, facial structure, movements in the heavens, earth formations, the manipulations of the broken and unbroken lines in the hexagrams of the Yijing (易经, The Book of Changes), and words (including those transmitted by mediums). Western scholars thoroughly researched the technique usually referred to as “geomancy” (fengshui 風水, literally “wind and water”; dili xue 地理學, “study of the principles of the earth”; or kanyu 堪輿, “canopy and chariot” in traditional sources). There are also works on the later use of Yijing and fortune-telling. Other methods of divination that have received attention in Western studies include oneiromancy, sortilege, and planchette. The last technique implies the activities of mediums who may be possessed by the deities or spirits at various degrees — from conscious to unconscious states — and has been widely used for different purposes in sectarian temples, more mainstream “phoenix halls” (luantang 鶴堂) often patronized by the local elites, and Daoist


temples since the middle of the nineteenth century at the latest. Planchette divinations were closely related to prophecies and to the compilation of “morality books” (shanshu 善書, see below).

An intriguing area of the field is the study of gender problematic in Chinese religion. For a long time Western scholars had noticed that the forms of worship by men and women differed in China. Scholars have argued that the reasons for this are peculiarities of the social status of women in Chinese society: the potentially destructive power of women is related to their inferior status in the family. This status of women is seen as equal to that of “strangers” in the traditional Chinese cosmology (see section 4). For example, Margery Wolf has analyzed the structure of a typical family in the following way. In many regions of China women had to move into their husband’s homes after marriage. However, the husband’s lineage (patriline) never accepted them as fully entitled members. A woman could find her salvation in the “uterine” family composed of herself and her children, especially sons. This creates psychological tension in a family that is also reflected in the religious life of people.

A number of female cults emerged in the late imperial period. There are Western works on the female cults in China and forms of female religiosity related to their specific role in the traditional society. Self-representation of female cults often challenged the traditional hierarchy of values. Basing his work on a theory of Margery Wolf, Sangren has argued that female cults reflect the ambiguity of the social status of women in the family lineage. From the point of view of the lineage, a woman can take a double role: the unifying role of mother/sister and the divisive role of wife/daughter-in-law. Women simultaneously constitute a means for continuation of domestic groups and a threat to their solidarity. Believers think of many female deities in their “mother” status, while their divisive role is not directly expressed in sacred symbols. According

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to Sangren, “while the connection between mothers as unifying forces and female deities is explicitly recognized and positively valued, women’s divisive potential as wives is implicitly denied normative legitimacy and given only an indirect (if not unconscious) religious expression in pollution beliefs.”\textsuperscript{94} The second important conclusion of Sangren is his interpretation of female cults as “important (and perhaps even necessary) counterparts to the hierarchical, bureaucratic orthodoxies of state religion, territorial cults and ancestor worship.\textsuperscript{95} This second thesis is related to the broader discussion of the relations between society and cosmology in China (see part 4).

A number of Western works analyzed women’s engagement in the specific forms of popular Buddhism and sects. In connection with the Buddhist interpretations of the female nature as inherently sinful and ritually impure, special rituals aimed at the purification and ultimate salvation of women developed in the traditional society.\textsuperscript{96} There were various responses on the part of the male literati towards women’s engagement in religious activities in late imperial times.\textsuperscript{97}

Recently Western scholars also have started to reevaluate the male gender aspect of Chinese religiosity. One can regard the rituals of secret societies and the worship of deified outlaws (see section 4) as particular forms of male religiosity that also challenge the norms of state and lineage. The forms of male religiosity in relation to the social and family tensions


\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 25.


became the subject of a book by Avron Boretz.\(^98\) Boretz explores the social background of ritual violence in several locations in China. He interprets this martial ritual practice as a counterpart of the civil power in lineages and also as an expression of suppressed desire for independence on the part of young men. Significantly, ritual actors who are presented in the book are members of sworn brotherhoods and gangs. They are outcasts of society who do not have stable places in the usual family hierarchy.

For a long time multi-language studies of Chinese popular religion have taken mainly rural areas inhabited by the Han nationality as their objects. However, Western scholars also have made a considerable contribution to the study of religious traditions in cities and towns. As Katz has fairly noted, sinologists for long did not pay enough attention the religious traditions of cities.\(^99\) At the same time, Western scholars early initiated ethnographic descriptions of large city temples and their activities.\(^100\) During a period of extensive anthropological studies of Chinese religion, detailed studies of temple and cult associations in the cities appeared.\(^101\) These studies emphasized the role of temples in the organization of social life: local elites sponsored the cults in return for prestige and authority in the locality.

Since 2000 Western scholars of Chinese religion have published several studies that analyzed the role of religious associations in Chinese cities. In her study of temple life in Peking,


(Beijing) during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Naquin has demonstrated the multifunctionality of religious establishments in a city: they were used for fairs, markets, charity, tourism, politics, and leisured sociability; therefore, they had a decisive impact on public city life.\textsuperscript{102} Especially important was the religious establishments’ role in providing space for social activities for gatherings of diverse groups. Naquin has analyzed various forms of religious establishments and the roles taken by various strata of the urban population in religious activities. The comparative analysis extends over the line of the Ming-Qing transition in 1644. Naquin also has used rare sources, namely commemorative inscriptions, in recreating the history of religious life. Richard Belsky has further explored the religious aspect of huiguan (會館, native place lodges) noted by Naquin.\textsuperscript{103} There are also Western works on the special features of various religious traditions in the urban environment.\textsuperscript{104} They explore such issues as the revival of religious traditions in urban centers during the Republican period, the transformation of these traditions in relation to the formation of Chinese “modernity,” the interaction of lay believers and clergy in religious activities, and the broad social influence of religious associations, such as their educational and philanthropic undertakings.

Quite a rare topic in the studies of popular religion is the role of cults and religious practices in legal culture. This subject was explored in the recent book by Paul R. Katz, in which he analyzed a number of the so-called judicial rituals: oaths (often in the form of chicken-


\textsuperscript{103} Richard Belsky, \textit{Localities at the Center: Native Place, Space, and Power in Late Imperial Beijing} (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 137–138.

beheadings), rituals of penitence and self-mortification, and underworld indictments.  

As noted in sections four and five, Western scholars of Chinese religion paid special attention to the forms and methods of the transmission of religious beliefs and practices in traditional China. We already have noted the abundance of Western works on ritual, so-called “rites of passage,” that are usually defined as the institutionalized practices surrounding the transition from one social category to the next. Two other major forms of organization of religious life in Chinese society, festivals and pilgrimages, always have been important subjects in Western works. Special studies of Chinese festivals in English became classics in this area of research. Among those are studies that provide a comprehensive schedule of the festival year and those that examine a special festival: New Year, the Dragon Boat Festival, the Ghost Festival, and the Plague Festival. Western scholars also have paid considerable attention to the temple festivals and their role in local communities, especially in rural regions. There are case studies of particular temple festivals, and general works concentrating on the history and revival of these events in China.

With regard to the pilgrimages, a special volume edited by Naquin and Chun-fang Yu


110 Katz, Demon Hordes, pp. 141–172.

contains several related case studies of these. The essays in this volume explore the formation and functioning of the most important pilgrimage centers from the perspectives of anthropology, art, history, literature, and politics. The essays mostly deal with the pilgrimages to sacred mountains; for example, Glen Dudbridge has discussed female pilgrimages to Mount Tai (Taishan 泰山), John Lagerwey to the centers of Mountain Wudang (Wudangshan 武當山), Naquin to the religious centers and associations of Mountain Miaofeng (Miaofengshan 妙峰山) in the vicinity of Beijing, and Yu the history of Putuo Island (Putuoshan 普陀山), a sacred site of the cult of Guanyin. Brian R. Dott undertook a deep analysis of the late imperial period pilgrimages to Mount Tai. In his book he has proceeded from the fact that various social groups of pilgrims went there and describes how their varying interactions with the sacred site were related to their identities. Thus Dott has analyzed the social landscape of Mount Tai and examined the motives of prosperous male literati as well as those of women and illiterate pilgrims, using the evidence from fiction, poetry, travel literature, and official records as well as his fieldwork.

The attention of Western scholars of Chinese religion was primarily attracted to the textual transmission, especially literature in the vernacular, which was the means of the transmission of religious beliefs and practices. The most common sources to be used by Western scholars are popular scriptures dealing with the hagiographies of deities. I have noted above the studies of a particular sectarian literature called “precious scrolls” by Overmyer (see section 2). Another category of popular religious literature, “morality books,” was the subject of special

112 Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).


114 Identity Reflections: Pilgrimages to Mount Tai in Late Imperial China (Cambridge: the Harvard University Asia Center, 2004).

studies in Western languages before the related studies of Chinese scholars appeared. Especially noteworthy is the case of the use of a popular form of “morality book” by a Buddhist monk, Yunqi Zhuhong (1535–1615), studied by Chun-fang Yu.

There are also Western studies of other written sources on popular cults, such as “transformation texts” (bianwen 變文), texts of the Tang and Five Dynasties (907–960) periods discovered in Dunhuang in 1900, which have primarily Buddhist connotations but also narrate popular indigenous stories; and later folklore. Western scholars of Chinese religion also have analyzed the roles of other literary forms, such as the vernacular novel, in the processes of creation and transmission of the cults of the deities. Several studies mentioned above extensively use literary material. Western scholars have translated and analyzed a number of novels that have important religious meaning.


The media of popular religion analyzed in Western works, however, have not been limited to literary sources. Several Western studies have discussed the relations between popular cults and art, namely temple architecture and murals. A number of scholars have used the method of combining the study of written sources with analysis of art objects. Several scholars also approach popular cults from the perspective of the performative arts, especially folk theater. The study of ritual music in the context of popular religion is also a growing field in the West.

Conclusion

Concluding this very brief survey, I would like to note that Western scholarship on Chinese popular religion since early times up to the present moment has been diverse and innovative in terms of approaches, subjects, and views. However, it appears that the major concern of many Western scholars was the social role of Chinese religion. They have demonstrated that a religious element (the element concerning the supernatural powers) was important in the history of Chinese society and state. One can approach this aspect of religion from different angles.

Western scholars have made important contributions to the theoretical basis of the studies, and they also have introduced new research methods and collected a considerable amount of 

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valuable information on Chinese religion. Initially they applied a number of Western concepts to Chinese religions, but many of these concepts have been reevaluated from the perspective of the Chinese situation as research has continued. Western scholarship has played an important role in the formation of the field of the study of Chinese religion, paralleled by the development of Chinese and Japanese studies. Its influence has constituted an important impetus for numerous studies in East Asian languages: Chinese and Japanese scholars often cite Western works and debate with their authors. Western scholars often present an “outsider’s” view on the Chinese situation, and they often bring up issues that indigenous scholars would overlook or underestimate. We can conclude that Western scholarship can inspire further study in various directions, and that the study of Western research works remains important for East Asian scholars of Chinese religion. Western scholarship on Chinese popular religion had important achievements in the past, and it remains a strong and growing field. Major theoretical questions remain open and await answers in the future.
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